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**Proposal would charge drivers of electric cars****A “vehicle road usage charge” would stand in for the gas taxes other owners pay to help support the road network**

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**BY DAVID STEVES***The Register-Guard*Published: **Tuesday, Feb 1, 2011 05:02AM**

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SALEM — Electric vehicle drivers won't be getting a free ride when it comes to paying for Oregon's roads, if advocates of an odometer fee have their way.

A bill before the Oregon Legislature aims to deal with the government's potential beefs with a growing fleet of cars and trucks that never stop for fuel at a gas station: that they don't ever pay the gas tax that helps cover the cost of state and local road construction and maintenance.

Under House Bill 2328, those drivers would pay a “vehicle road usage charge,” starting with model year 2014 electric vehicles and plug-in gas-electric hybrids.

“We have to make sure that they are contributing to the cost of the roads that they are driving on,” said state Rep. Terry Beyer, a Springfield Democrat and chairwoman of the state Road User Fee Task Force, which recommended the tax legislation.

The proposal is something of a second-generation version of an experiment Oregon conducted in 2005-07 with global positioning system — GPS — technology. Gas tax revenues were failing to keep up with transportation spending demands because of increasingly fuel-efficient cars.

Close to 300 volunteer participants in the Portland area used on-board transmitters that allowed the state to track their in-state miles driven and charge corresponding fees of 1.2 cents per mile instead of a gas tax.

The pilot project drew national attention, and according to a state-issued report it demonstrated that such an approach someday could work as a replacement for the gas tax.

Public concern surfaced, though. Some criticized the potential for an expanding bureaucracy. Others said the per-mile fee was too high and exceeded what a similar vehicle would pay in gas taxes.

And the use of GPS technology capable of tracking motorists' movements prompted

privacy worries, the report acknowledged.

### **14,000 miles for \$90**

The program's overseer, Jim Whitty, said those lessons informed the new HB 2328 proposal.

"All of the major concerns from the original pilot are addressed in this bill," said Whitty, director of the Office of Innovative Partnerships for the state Department of Transportation.

The latest fee would be set at 0.6 cents per gallon. That means an electric car driven 15,000 miles a year in Oregon would cost \$90 in fees.

That is on par with what a 48-miles-per-gallon Toyota Prius hybrid costs in state gas taxes (at 29 cents-per-gallon) for the same distance traveled. And it's half what the driver of a 24-mpg vehicle would pay in gas taxes driving the same distance.

The bill also requires the development of an option of tracking and reporting miles driven to protect drivers' privacy by avoiding the use of "vehicle location technology." Instead, that option is likely to rely on technology to transmit remotely miles driven as recorded by the vehicle's odometer, Whitty said.

Those drivers would need to use a log book or other method of documenting miles driven off of Oregon roads — for example, in other states — so they can seek a refund for the fee paid on that travel.

Although the bill has yet to be scheduled for a hearing or to receive widespread debate, it has the potential for bipartisan support.

Republican Rep. Cliff Bentz — co-chairman of the House Transportation and Economic Development Committee, which will take up the bill — said the general concepts in HB 2328 are worth at least considering.

Rather than viewing it as a new tax — something Republicans generally oppose — Bentz said he sees it as a way to ensure that drivers are treated equitably for their use of a public resource: the transportation system.

"Everyone has got to pay for what they use," said the Ontario lawmaker, who served on the task force that recommended HB 2838. "To the extent the bill does that and fills a current void, I support it."

### **26,500 plug-in hybrids by 2017**

The number of cars expected to bypass the gas pumps entirely is expected to jump significantly.

Whitty said his department has projected that the number of plug-in hybrids in Oregon will increase from 600 this year to 4,800 when the new fee would take effect. By 2017, the number of such vehicles in Oregon is projected to reach 26,500.

Marie Dodds, spokeswoman for AAA Oregon/Idaho, said her group supports the concept in HB 2838 as a way to ensure electric car drivers pay for the roads they use. But not all future electric car drivers feel that way.

John Christian, chairman for the Oregon Electric Vehicle Association, said such motorists most likely would pay a token amount with a per-mile fee. But the hassle of dealing with it and the message it sends will be a discouragement to a clean-energy innovation that the state should do more to encourage, he said.

Christian, who lives in Beaverton and is awaiting delivery of an all-electric Nissan Leaf, said that when it comes to road user fees, drivers of such vehicles should get a free ride — or pay a simple, flat-rate fee of \$25 or \$50 a month — until their numbers match those of drivers still getting around in fuel-burning models.

“Until then, I think society should encourage non-fossil-fuel-burning transportation,” he said.

### **Turning over new Leafs**

At the Lithia Nissan dealership in Eugene, sales leader Keith Brewer said he’s been selling every electric Leaf vehicle that Nissan has been willing to promise him — even though the vehicles won’t arrive until April.

For example, Brewer said he had 33 Leafs available to sell in January — all of them claimed. The vehicles retail in the range of \$30,000.

Buyers can back out up until the vehicles’ arrival, however, and Brewer said he expects to have at least a few on hand for sale at the dealership beginning in April. He said the dealership is champing at the bit to offer the cars.

“We have three charging stations right here at the dealership,” he said. “We’ve got our service center up and running; our service technician is certified and ready to go.”

“It’s like playing bingo and you just need one more number,” Brewer said. “We’re ready to say ‘bingo!’ — that’s where we’re at.”

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